

# MA DIGITAL MEDIA Project 1

By Radica Wright

**Extracted from my Supporting Material File  
Created in the process of my first digital media project  
11 May 2011**

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## *Storytelling Snaps*



<http://photomedia.lincoln.ac.uk/rwright/>

## **Jim's Still Life, Real Life**

### **Summary & Concept**

I am curious how a snapshot captures a moment that can trigger a memory and release a tale. My project will be to create a series of digital images and their stories that trace my case study's life over his eighty years. Through Jim's archive images I will select photos of his life, show them to him and record stories from his memories. Jim's self narrative will be my digital storytelling project created to evoke a time and place linking the past into the present.

**Case study:** Hubert James Wright known as 'Jim'



**Jim aged 18, Bridlington Beach 1947**

In Sontag's essay *Plato's Cave* (1977) for me she accurately described photographs as "*experience captured*" and that, in essence, conceptually inspired my project. My work is about storytelling through archive photos. This art form has evolved over time with the landscape of computerisation. Our private images and stories are now being shared across public digital media platforms. I can define my passion through the description used by the Centre for Digital Storytelling (1998) "*anyone who has a desire to document life experience, ideas, or feelings through the use of story and digital media*".

Digital storytelling is the method I will use to create a short narrative by merging images and audio [interview clips, and possibly other sounds] on the same sort of platforms to further explore media convergence as defined by Henry Jenkins (2010).



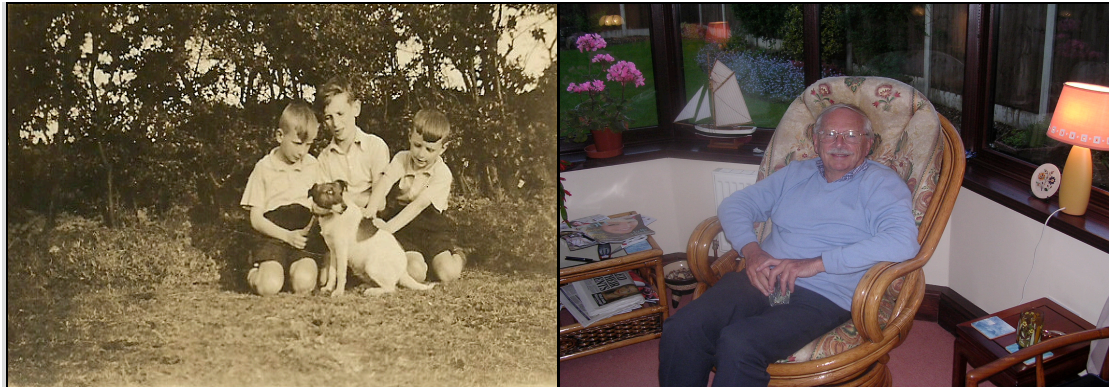
*"We are living in an age when changes in communications, storytelling and information technologies are reshaping almost every aspect of contemporary life -- including how we create, consume, learn, and interact with each other. A whole range of new technologies enable consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content and in the process, these technologies have altered the ways that consumers interact with core institutions of government, education, and commerce."*



**Autobiographical storytelling captured from recalling experiences  
(personal cultural memory) into short digital narratives**

**Snapshot of my Case Study**

Jim was born Hubert James Wright on the 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1928 in Cleckheaton, West Yorkshire. He has two older brothers, Neville and Richard, and he says they are closer now than they have ever been. They grew up during the Second World War.



**Jim aged 4, pictured right, with his brothers and their Grandma's dog Peggy**

**Jim aged 80, retiring in his favourite chair**

He married Joyce in 1952 and they have a son called Graham. Jim was a chemist by trade and his long career with ICI saw him working and living for three years in Mexico, as well as overseeing projects in many other countries, until taking early retirement aged 57. Then he worked as a consultant and lived in Hong Kong for six years before returning to the UK to start his own company. Today Jim lives with his wife in Nottinghamshire and, after retiring three times, he now has definitely retired!

I have divided my project into two parts:

**1. Research and evidence to inform my digital storytelling idea.**

I wanted to understand the changes and shifts from analogue to digital in this medium, finding out about what is out there [on line, references, home and abroad] and looking deeper into recalling and storytelling.

**2. My practical practice to develop and create Jim's digital story.**

I planned to map the logistics and technical requirements needed to create the project within the deadline and to meet the intended outcomes.

My creative content will be sourced primarily from analogue stills dating from the 1930s mixed with some digital capture up to 2008 including soundbites from Jim [and maybe other audio, like music, depending if my case study's memory triggers any] because these are key elements of moments in time that lead to a memory unleashed by images [and sounds]. Undoubtedly the snaps capture others along the way and it is individual moments and key events that have made up Jim's life like his family, friends and colleagues.

Autobiographical memory is putting together significant photos that are personal times [events] in Jim's life. I can see why Lundby describes digital stories as seeing oneself "*in relation to family, friends, community and suchlike*" (2008). Although it is a personal journey the project engages others because we can all relate to an image that triggers a memory, good or bad, recalling a song or a smell can bring back that moment. Capture is powerful because as it records an experience, I would argue it is a time that is still alive to illustrate how our past has shaped our future. Narrative structures have temporality whereby retaining the past, being in the here and now [present] and anticipating the future, relating to Heidegger's (1962) 'Being and Time': relationship with the world and self. Jim's lived experience captured in his personal family (vernacular) photos enable him to tell stories from his 'objects of memory'. Jim's self narrative, memories of his past [for example of the Second World War] also become national narratives to help make meaning - mediation of memory. I can identify with the view of memory from Halbwachs (1992) as a shared social framework and see my project fitting into that sense of social recognition and cultural belonging. Many can identify with first love, [Jim married his childhood girlfriend], and old age [Jim's cruising coincided with his poor mobility].

In the age of analogue it was the norm as outlined by Van Dijck (2008) that "*personal photography was first and foremost a means for autobiographical remembering*". Before the digital camera Jim, like many people in the West, had many photos tucked away in albums. Jim even had some negatives in their original envelopes from the analogue days of sending them off to be processed – and Jim is not alone as Rubinstein & Sluis (2008) sum up:



*“Since the beginning of the twentieth century the snapshot has been the archetypal readymade image: placeholder for memories, trophy of sight-seeing, produced in their millions by ordinary people to document the rituals of everyday life. And yet despite being the most mass produced photographic product, the snapshot has remained highly private, concealed from public eye, and quite often an invisible image.”*

With digital technology and converging media the ‘private’ snapshot has evolved – the ‘invisible’ image has become publicly visible. Images now are in the World Wide Web ‘public sphere’ whereby individual personal memory has evolved into the collective of cultural memory - *“collaborative re-casting of ‘the past’ - of a particular group, event or experience - in the present.”* (Hoskins, 2001 p.366) Photos have become a part of our sharing society where the information and digital age has grown into our individual data now part of the database culture. It is interesting, albeit not surprising, to see that the placeholder definition is used across the disciplines from psychology to technology.

**Psychology Definition:** *Memory refers to the processes that are used to acquire, store, retain and later retrieve information. There are three major processes involved in memory: encoding, storage and retrieval. Cherry, K., 2008*

**Technology Definition:** *“Memory is the electronic holding place for instructions and data”*  
Tech Target, 1998

Jim, like most people who have taken stills over the years, has them stored away in boxes and old suitcases in his loft. When Jim retrieved these archives the placeholder description was evident, and his memories were kept there and also very much in the present. When Jim chose shots for his wife’s birthday calendar he had a tale to tell of each snap– about the people, place and even the smell – that was engaging. It was a great way of storytelling through his memories. Although this was the start of my idea - to take Jim as my case study with snapshots of his life – I had to further explore how to create it. Moreover I needed to see if there were similar ideas that were produced on digital platforms [online and mobile] and examine the issues surrounding my project from meanings of memory to multimedia storytelling - mediation and mediatisation of memory. Our private self is put into a public space offering plenty of discourse about mediation and mediatisation across the social spectrum, from politics to sociology (Wright, 2011). The more I looked into the explanations of mediation and mediatisation the more I discovered differing meanings to different settings

outlined by Couldry (2008). Needless to say that interpretation plays its part here, and in the context of my project I see mediation as transmitting something, Jim's memories, through a media platform (online image and audio) for digital storytelling – expressed as a “*concrete act of communication by means of a medium in a specific social context*” (Hjarvard, 2008, p.114). I see mediatization as a process where common patterns (self narrative, Jim's experiential events) of this cultural/social activity (autobiographical storytelling) flow through into a public media form (the worldwide web). Mediated memories of Jim's personal family photos, his lived experiences, and what he has selected from his past ‘objects of memory’ are a way for him to connect them with events - thus his way of making meaning out of them. Jim's personal cultural memory is how he sees himself, how he wants others to see him, and the continuity of himself as well as sharing with others. As Jim recalled memories and constructed stories about him and others in the photos I could see the four self images of Jim (mental, idealized, photographed and public) tied up in a theory by Barthes (1981). He used the terms ‘studium’ (careful interpretation or studying) and ‘punctum’ (passionate – touching bit of detail) on his photographs applying one or the other. Then just over 25 years later his concepts were taken further linking both together when looking at a photo (and music), within a framework of social memory and historical narrative (Pickering and Keightley, 2006, p.156). I observed that Jim did studium and punctum in his photos, and that more often than not his recollection was immediate on seeing the photo - studium first and punctum second. It is a process that also has feelings of nostalgia. I am framing nostalgia in Pickering and Keightley's simplest and modern meaning “*to identify both a sense of personal loss and longing for an idealized past*” (2006, p.922).

Undertaking this project through further research simultaneously widened my knowledge around the contemporary debates surrounding digital media. Defining the concept of storytelling enabled me to look at it in light of digital media culture. Storytelling is a narrative and it formed from our ancient history and exists into our digital culture. It is part of the fabric of our societies and cultures as summed up by Barthes (in Leitch et al, 2010) “*The narratives of the world are numberless*”. A story can be told verbally, written, in picture form or with sound, and can be one or more of these elements. It is a cultural art form for conveying and sharing, fact and/or fiction,

from carvings in caves and religious paintings to traditional oral history and digital narratives [eyewitness accounts, on line news, social networks, etc]. Thus stories can be told in multiple formats [articles, talking books, film, etc.], covering many disciplines [educational, media, historical, scientific, and so forth] and with a narratological perspective [Point Of View, POV]. In the past, as in the present and the future, stories can be told over and over i.e. re-versioned or remediated. I echo Benjamin's definition of a story: *"It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time."* [The Storyteller, 1963]

For me a digital story is about any self narrative in the widest possible context whereby individuals put information about themselves [self data] on digital networks. Digital storytelling is about 'self' life logging and data mining. To narrow the field I looked at how my project would sit within the traditional digital storytelling sites that were born in the late twentieth century and continue to date.

*"Digital Storytelling is the modern expression of the ancient art of storytelling. Digital stories derive their power by weaving images, music, narrative and voice together, thereby giving deep dimension and vivid color to characters, situations, experiences, and insights".* Digital Storytelling Association, 2004

Those digital storytelling projects, like mine, have moved from a private sphere into a shared socio, economic, cultural and political space. As Daniel Meadows argues digital storytelling has the *"potential to change the way we engage in our communities"* (Photobus, 2002). Digital storytelling is not easy to absolutely pin down as outlined by Couldry (2008). It is evolving, driven culturally and technologically, and Hjarvard argues that digital storytelling can be seen as having the *"potential to contribute to the strengthening of democracy"* (2008). He is not alone in his thinking, see Jenkins earlier, and Meadows asserts that citizens can be empowered by their digital stories *"when imagined as a tool of democratised media"* (Photobus, 2002). Although this can be seen as digital citizenship we have to comply with the digital 'templates' [systems, structures, protocols] in order to participate, whereby whatever digital device we use has its own rules of engagement e.g. terms and conditions, limited number of characters, and so forth. The traditional storytelling



sites have set up their own definition of a digital story. For example Meadows asserts a strict structure: “250 words, a dozen or so pictures, and two minutes is about the right length” (Photobus, 2002). Large broadcast institutions like the BBC adopted instructions for individuals to create a digital story. Some may argue it is good practice to have ‘rules’ when undertaking a project en mass, or anything in fact, and others would say it is a form of ‘control’. BBC participants were told it is a “*short film made from a script...with pictures from your photo album*” (BBC Telling Lives, 2005). A less prescriptive description for a digital story comes from The Centre for Digital Storytelling (1998) where it sees this form as ‘story circles’ and its approach is an “*emphasis on personal voice*”. The latter is where I see my project because the creative narrative structure is fluid depending on the person and framed with her/him at the heart of the story. From my findings so far in the UK and abroad (e.g. HD UY, 2009, YouTube Digital Stories Asia, 2010, et al) I would argue that by its subjective nature, different from person to person, the crux of digital storytelling is told from the POV of self narrative. The latter is outlined further as self expression and representation where digital stories are summed up as “*small scale and bottom up*” (Lundby, 2008, p.363). I expressed earlier, and it is worth reiterating, that in a wider context digital storytelling can be seen as any online personal narrative – actively communicating and sharing our lives as part of the upload and download culture.

I started off by using eight images, for each decade of my case study’s eighty years to experiment with initially. Then as my research and experimentation developed I used 22 images on the final interface.

Feedback on my digital media project to date has come from my case study who simply said “*Wow!*” and from the flash expert who concluded that the interface is robust; fills the screen and invites the user to engage with the images/stories. My critical friend felt that I had set my sights rather high for my first project and it showed my dedication for creating digital media that I managed to pull it off. “*You’ve come a long way, and excelled, seriously. Congratulations on your achievements.*”

I valued the input of others, particularly because I was working solo on this project. It was beneficial to have collaborations throughout the process because brainstorming,

problem solving and deciding which way to develop my work was all part of it - and it is certainly more fun with others.

## **PROJECT EVALUATION**

### **Edited Extracts**

I was passionate about doing my project so that I could research, develop and realise my idea into a digital piece. From the outset to the deadline I was learning by doing [experiential]. Key stages included researching the initial concept, putting it into context, looking into the possible content, planning the content, mapping out the logistics, testing my project [prototype pieces], checking its user-ability, managing my creative time, prioritising my overall workload, and delivering the project submissions on time. I decided to undertake areas that I have never done before, still imaging and archiving, so that I could challenge myself to explore and experiment in digital media, outside my comfort zone. I thought deeply when I started this project: from the art of storytelling and its context within the digital media landscape, to my self-development to try new techniques/approaches. As well as comparing and contrasting digital stories, I also looked into the overall ethics across issues from consent (Oral History Society, 2008) to content – the philosophy, planning, making of digital storytelling (Bristol Stories, 2005, Aberth Digital Storytelling, 2008, Digistories, 2008). I was also aware that recalling memories from one's past may trigger a 'loss' (Pickering and Keightly, 2006). I thought critically throughout my research and development to inform my practice. Being engaged in the theory around digital media and new technology provided a robust framework to examine my concept and to identify appropriate production methods. Through research and development I gained confidence to be proactive in deeper enquiry and visual analysis into my subject matter to fully realise the strengths and weaknesses of my concept. At key stages I would liaise with others to look at the content pieces and their context within the digital storytelling landscape. The brainstorming sessions were invaluable and helped me to think about the techniques and approaches I could adopt and experiment with. I enlisted a critical friend [with digital media design experience] to look at my concept and aspects around visual aesthetics and user-ability. This module

process has enhanced my practice, both critically and creatively. My research and development about storytelling and digital stories historicity, new technology and digital media theories have covered the learning outcomes for my overall self development as outlined here.

Looking at digital storytelling in the context of theory and critical practice I analysed how this media form evolved: from origins of the traditional art of storytelling in communities to pieces of digital self narrative in the networked society. I identified key areas that make up digital storytelling across multi-disciplines from history to psychology: archive; memory; self narrative; nostalgia; temporality; stories; information; sharing; convergence; technology and new media. Then I put it into context in digital systems and structures I would be working with. Thus issues around authorship and ownership, power and democracy, rights and responsibilities, control and emancipation, exploitation and empowerment are always at play. These areas are blurred in the digital world as in the real world, but what is clear is I could begin to create an appropriate piece for the digital media landscape.

My perspective is that the landscape is about us, digital culture, within evolving new technology in the digital age. My project has been created by my role with multimedia platforms and digital technologies. It has been produced by copying and/or borrowing pieces [archive photos, extracted movie sounds, codes, etc.] to [re]create and [re]contextualise my case study's captured images and recorded audio to share his lived experiences. My work involved looking at the traditional storytelling sites that were formed with new technological changes in the late twentieth century. It was a way to share our experiences in multimedia with others globally. Our cultural shifts have led to our appropriation of digital media. Individual creativity [self production] has evolved and my project has enabled my case study to [re]create his memories and [re]live his experiences. My strategy was to keep the authenticity of his archives [only minor cleaning up of images] and give them a new lease of [digital] life for new audiences. It was clear from the outset that it was my project but in-keeping with Jim's stories. Further strategic decisions were adopted: I picked the events in my case study's life, then I showed them to Jim without him seeing the images beforehand, I recorded his spontaneous memory, I created and



collated relevant sounds to craft data together. My creative strategy is not only a mix of analogue and digital media - it can be seen as older cultural forms with new media ones.

Media technologies inspired me to experiment [socially, culturally, aesthetically] and convergence has shaped my project. The data flow between the large global structures of top-down [power] and bottom-up participatory cultures [empowerment] leads to new spaces for innovation and creation. It will craft different formats as we shift and evolve within real-virtual-time simulated-spaces and mass data marketplaces. The perspective of 'convergence culture' (Jenkins, 2006) explores the impact juxtaposition between old and new media. In experimenting I found that there are complex issues that needed working out to succeed in shaping my piece/s. E.g. achieve the best quality for file size; upload image size in the desired aspect ratio; compression rates if compiled image and audio are together; compatible broadband speeds for user download; online terms and conditions suitable for my work. Obviously the end-user was at the forefront throughout the process as well as how I could achieve my goals. The digital divide with the have and have-nots is a consideration in this media landscape because one has to have the technological means, hardware and software, for creating and uploading online (JISC Digital Media, 2009). The digital divide (21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenges) has an overall impact, and not just for digital stories. Individuals not only have to gain access to the technology but also the know how to use digital media to their advantage.

The aesthetics of post-modernists have enabled me to access 'media assets' and utilise digital technology to [re]make a new digital project on an online interface. Digital new media has evolved to allow me to re-work existing content for my project. The 'meta-data' (Manovich, 2001) concept is applicable to part of my production process with convergence (Jenkins, 2006) and audience participation in a process that is temporal in an open network. My project is part of the on-line archival records with the increased automation of 'media management'. My work will add to the continuation of data being manipulated and recoded aesthetics as our digital culture continues to evolve.

For now I can only reflect ‘in action’ (Schon, 1983) as my work is in progress: undoubtedly my self development has been enhanced as I have achieved a deeper level of understanding and knowledge in digital media around my chosen project. My concept for “*experience captured*” has been realised for this piece of work with my curiosity satisfied on how a snapshot captures a moment to trigger a memory/story. I have been able to create a series of digital images and their stories that trace my case study’s life over his eighty years. Thus my aim and objectives have been met in realising this project within the timescale and meeting the learning outcomes. I would have liked to experiment more [headline on images, flipping them with information on the back, hyperlinks] but I needed more time and experience on the software. I have not ruled out having a go for my practice, even after the project’s deadline.

It has been an ongoing decision making process from which images to choose to font size for the overall design. Digital media is subjective, like any art form. It is creative and dependent on the authorship of the work so I am proud of the choices made in making my project. It has been fantastic and a little frustrating as learning new techniques/approaches inevitably are - and that was the challenge I had set myself from the outset. My nose up against the digital media window at the start to see the opportunities I could take has been exciting. I have learnt that once you have the concept you can explore and experiment, with the relevant technology. I am looking forward to my next project with great enthusiasm – taking many lessons from this one.

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